

## **Chancellor's Community Forum**

A New Approach to Student Discipline

Sousa Middle School

January 28, 2009

6:00 pm – 8:00 pm

**Discussion Leader: Clara Canty**

**Overview:** A discussion on the revised Chapter 25 DCPS code on discipline. Many discussion members wanted a guarantee of additional school resources for implementing the proposed disciplinary changes, like additional **counselors** or **social workers**. Most agreed that the tier system is effective, but would like more clarity in terms of proper responses. Many also wished to see a stronger focus on **preventative measures** to students' behavioral problems.

**Keywords:** alternative placements, expulsion, suspension, suspended, peer mediation, conflict resolution, therapists, counselors, prevention measures, safety, security, full service schools, anger management, social workers, mediation, absences, truancy, tardiness, wrap around services, psychologists, preventative measures, attendance, SAM schools.

**Presenter/ Moderator:** Chad Ferguson, Deputy Chief of Youth Engagement & Instructional Superintendent - Cluster VI

### **Codes**

CC: Clara Canty, Assistant Superintendent, Division III

CF: Chad Ferguson, Instructional Superintendent Cluster V

PO: Peggy O'Brien, Chief of Family and Public Engagement, OOC

JD: John Davis, Transition Team Leader, Office of the Chief of Schools

MR: Michelle Rhee, Chancellor, DC Public Schools

DJ: Dwan Jordan, Principal, Sousa Middle School

CM: Community Member

### **Attendance:**

4 Teachers

1 Parents

2 Other School staff

8 Community representatives

6 Other

### **Notes:**

**CC:** *Do we have any reactions to the proposal?*

**CM:** I support the push for teacher-directed discipline. As a principal, I feel that we spend too much time on discipline. I have two issues with this plan:

1. In addition to tiers, we need guidelines for repeated behavior. There needs to be something for constant problems. There should be more options for **alternative placements**, for example.
2. I come from a tradition of Catholic schools, where just having a threat of **expulsion** is powerful. Kids need to know that the threats are real.

**CC:** We speak to repetitive offenders in our proposal.

**CM:** *Is there a way we can invite youth to weigh in on the proposal?*

**CC:** Youth were involved through focus groups, and they can always call in and e-mail their concerns and opinions.

**CM:** *Is there a process that will involve more **therapists**?*

**CC:** We have a **comprehensive staffing model** to include more **therapists** and **counselors** in our schools.

**CM:** *Is there language that speaks to the allocation of resources?*

**MR:** Chapter 25 is a part of the D.C. Municipal Regulations, therefore it does not include any allocation of resources. We are putting additional resources into staffing models for more **social workers**, guidance **counselors**, etc. For example, we are piloting a **full-service school model** with behavior specialists in middle school.

At the secondary level, there is an idea of creating different settings for kids – not all children can be taught and treated the same way. Many students have different learning styles. For example, last year we started the Youth Engagement Academy (YEA) and identified 8<sup>th</sup> graders at risk for dropping-out or that would have behavior problems in high school. YEA is a small-learning community. When it is a full 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade school, YEA will only have 300 kids in the school. They are on an alternative schedule and all students are involved in internships that they are interested in. Kids identified it as a very productive environment. Different environments with good role models and mentorships are more successful. We want to expand these programs. CHOICE Academy, for example, is an environment that children like. We are exploring the option of making CHOICE a full-time environment. Lots of kids mean thinking about different environments.

**CM:** *Have you given any thought to **suspended** students going to **SOME** school instead of staying at home?* In Little Rock, Arkansas, students are still required to go to school, so there is no instruction time lost. It became a hassle for the kids, and they realized that they couldn't get out of school.

**MR:** Absolutely, in practice we have kids **suspended** for 10-15 days and some students want that. It sends the wrong message. All students, even if they need to be removed from the classroom, they need to be in a learning environment.

**CM:** *Is there a concrete plan for **suspensions**?*

**MR:** We are piloting different styles of in-school **suspensions** in numerous schools.

**CM:** *How will that be structured? Will there be staff?*

**CC:** In school **suspension** is done differently by school. Some have a person dedicated to watching kids on **suspension**. Others handle things differently.

**MR:** The pilots we are looking to run come with additional resources. They are structured, high-quality programs. Some students cause problems because they are at below grade level and are frustrated that they cannot keep up in class. We need to try to accelerate their movement so they can get to a comfortable place in the larger classroom.

**CM:** I believe in the importance of developing **prevention measures** in the disciplinary documents. We should build out **conflict resolution** procedures. There are certainly a lot we could use.

**MR:** We have been working with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and Chief Cathy Lanier on the **safety** and **security** of our buildings. Kids will tell you more police officers in the school don't make them feel safer.

We spend millions a year on bodies to patrol and **intervene**. So we are asking "how can we look at the amount of money we have and create a staffing model that works on **preventative measures**?" We are looking into **peer mediation** programs and **conflict resolution** programs so we can be more proactive. We are addressing gang conflicts, neighborhood issues, etc. so that we don't have to focus on prosecution.

**CC:** We want an intentional approach to be proactive.

**CM:** I am a former teacher. I work with elementary aged children. I think that there has been a shift in acceptable behaviors in the classroom. Years ago, the tier one would say "chewing gum" and "passing notes." Those actions continue to disrupt learning but we don't pay attention to those anymore. Take random cursing by young children, for example. I would like for us to start thinking that academic environment is for learning. All disruptive behavior is harmful. Small actions still disrupt the learning environment. Even at tier 1, those behaviors disrupt. I'm worried that some offenses don't make tier one.

**CC:** This document does not address every behavior. The approach will involve teachers as well. The intent is that children remain in the classroom. Those behaviors that you mentioned can be addressed by the teacher and dealt with as he/she sees fit.

**CM:** My concern is with in-school **suspensions**. It doesn't seem to be effective or effectively enforced. **Suspension** is not a deterrent. Being at home isn't a bad thing. We need to develop strategies for promoting and rewarding positive behavior.

**CM:** We shouldn't focus on reprimanding students in middle school. The habits begin in elementary school.

**CC:** We do have comprehensive models in elementary schools. We have **SAM schools** in a number of our schools.

**CM:** We have no structure on the school end. It falls on elementary, consistency is a problem. A lot of it needs to fall back to the school, not the central office. There needs to be communication between parents and schools. If schools hold parents to disciplinary regulations and rules, they are going to get what they want in terms of student behavior.

**CC:** Tier-1 may address what you're looking for.

**DJ:** I'm the first-year principal at Sousa. I wanted to reward positive behavior, so we put a character education program into place. We try to set expectations for students. When kids come into school out of uniform, they know what to expect. We enforce it. The tiers were missing before this rewrite. We came up with a Sousa code of conduct so parents and educators had a general understanding with each other. It was going a different direction than the old guidelines, though. I'm glad we are finally getting on the same page. I think the tiers will cut down on miscommunication. There will be no going over principals' heads to get to the Chancellor. In the end, this code boils down to expectations and knowing the expectations. Kids know right from wrong. Are kids learning a lesson? At Sousa, we have coordinators and **counselors** to help them with that.

**CM:** The problem is that some schools don't even have one service. Even if they have 3 services, it's usually a reduced-effort. There are no quality programs.

**CC:** *Can we return to the document and focus on the big problems?*

**CM:** *How are teachers going to be trained or get the skills for implementing this? They are the greatest tools for implementing this new document. How are they going to get this training for emotional behavior and students in crisis? Teachers don't know what to do and make the conflict worse – but the child is blamed. How can we better equip these teachers?*

**CC:** Part of having **full-service school** gives teacher the tools to help students in crisis. It needs to be a school-wide effort with principals, **counselors** – everyone needs to be in communication.

**CM:** I would like to highlight something in the document on page 2 of Chapter 25 regarding "Changing and managing inappropriate behavior." It says, "DCPS will

encourage intervention and mediation *as well as* disciplinary consequences.” *Can we say OR? Can it be up to the teacher or administrators to determine what to use?*

Also, some of the words are not defined in the glossary. If you look at the definition page – I think it would be good for everything to be defined - terms like “**Anger management**” and “**community service**” should be defined so that we can support children’s behavior and appropriate next steps.

**CM:** I’m from Step Up DC. We have been taking a look at the disciplinary policy. One recommendation – this is good, but doesn’t go far enough with **social services**. *Can we add or mandate counseling, etc?* It seems like it isn’t coordinated. There needs to be something added – mandated – relating to severe tiers. 2500.5 (There is no mandatory recommendation, people don’t have to follow this)

**CM:** I noticed several places that this doesn’t apply to **truancy** and **absences**.

**CC:** There is a whole other **truancy** policy, located in a different chapter that is not covered by these guidelines

**CM:** I have problems with language in the plan itself. Take the options for **intervention**. *What if we are servicing an elementary school?* Some of these punishments seem harsh. Disciplinary **mediation** should be more preventative. We need to break down consequences between disciplinary and **preventative** measures

**CM:** *What does off-site suspension mean?*

**CC:** It means suspension at home or at CHOICE.

**CM:** 2502.3 – some things in this tier are flat-out illegal. Pornography, for example. I thought that would be illegal and would be placed in tier 4 or tier 5. Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, gambling: *Why are these tier 3?* Illegal actions should be automatically moved to tier 4 or 5. Coming from the elementary perspective, most punishments in tier 1 or tier 2 are enjoyable to children. They like parent conferences, they like leaving the classroom. The punishments actually increase the likelihood that they will continue or increase.

**CC:** It is meant to be instructional to reduce the infractions and change the behavior.

**CM:** There is a difference between the goal of a **social worker**, teacher, and **psychologist**. In other words, when a student leaves the classroom, the environment and goals are different. The **psychologist** gets a different response. They need to be working together.

**CC:** Exactly. We are trying to do it that way. This is what the plan helps to accomplish: communication.

**CM:** **Wrap-around services** need to be communicating with the different parts.

**CM:** *Should tardiness be in here? Should absences be taken care of somewhere else?*

**CC:** There is separate policy on **truancy**.

**CF:** The parts in Chapter 25 about **attendance** that are disciplinary are for kids who cut class. If kids are missing class on a consistent basis, you don't want to take them out of class. **Truancy** as a chronic problem is not a disciplinary issue.

**CM:** *Are there disciplinary issues with **truancy** in the policy?*

**CF:** No

**CM:** **Truancy** is a behavior problem that needs to be addressed.

**CF:** An **attendance** problem for an 8 year-old is different than a 15 year-old, so it might be a disciplinary problem for the 15 year-old, or they might be getting picked on and don't want to go to school, for example. We need to know the cause before we address it. If it falls under Chapter 25, we will address it accordingly. I think every possible discipline problem is addressed in this document.

What we want in these discussions is to add additional disciplinary problems we haven't thought of. When we are dealing with a discipline issue, we want clear and effective ways to do it.

**CM:** It would be helpful to have it labeled in a different way to address in terms of **absences** and **tardiness**. I would never consider using this for a 6 year old who is absent.

**CM:** I think there is a developmental appropriateness that is not recognized in this code. The tiers should be divided according to the age of a child. I think the consequences may be different and **mediation** may be approached differently. It may be covered here, but it leaves a lot to the discretion of the enforcer of the document.

**CF:** We think we have taken this into account. **Suspension** dates are done differently by age group, for example.

**CM:** *Moving forward, is there a mechanism that involves youth or community before it goes to the DC Council?*

**CF:** This has gone to Council. It is officially in the 45-day review period. It has been studied in focus groups in 6 different high schools, and we have received good feedback. We want to do middle school groups and maybe another high school group. Once it's approved, we need to roll it out. Everyone needs to understand it, and that will require a ton of work with teachers and principals. We will be work directly with students.

**CM:** *Is there a mandate for a kid who is **suspended** to be in contact with the parents?*

**CF:** We have included this in procedures for **suspension**. There is a mandatory conversation with the parent before the **suspension**. If it is a case with two students, then there needs to be some effort or **mediation** to resolve the conflict before they return to class.

**CM:** That's not a good approach to curbing school behavior. *Should **social workers** visit the homes, deliver homework, let them know that the schools care about them?*

**CF:** Yes, that is a good idea.

**CM:** *When a child goes to CHOICE, is there a way to speed it up so the child doesn't miss much school?*

**CF:** Yes – we have shortened the time period of notification at CHOICE. Part of our problems with **suspensions** is how they are implemented. Delays happen because adults in the system aren't doing things correctly. We want to tighten up procedures and oversight at a central level. Our intent is the more we know about the **suspension**, the tighter the process will be.

**CF:** Please get in touch with me - the more input the better. The document is almost at a place where the document is set – I'm hoping that we don't have huge changes. I think it's pretty close to right.

**CM:** You should add home visits to the tiers.

**CM:** You should add community conferences in schools. In a community conference, the student and the family are invited to the community conference. Baltimore has a successful system. It is used when there is specific harm against a person or property and the offence is determined and proven before punishment takes place. This plan doesn't allow for a conference before the consequence takes place.

**CM:** I think the conference should be optional. Some parents may not think it is necessary. Some may not know how to operate in that type of setting. As a parent dealing with other parents, I can tell you most don't like to get involved in those types of matters.

**CM:** What has been helpful is the view that disciplinary consequences are a form of learning. *Should we have someone to implement this?*

**CF:** In most cases, this is backed up by having someone on call to address the concerns.

**CM:** *What if we the outside person observes and helps teacher and student resolve problems together?*

**CF:** That is a great idea.

**CM:** It would be a great tool to have for student support.

**CM:** But you don't want to make teachers intimidated by yelling at them and having an outsider tell them how to handle their problems.

**CM:** It doesn't intimidate the teachers, it helps them.

**CC:** Having trained schools on behavior management, if students give up their authority, they are not doing it for the teacher.

**CM:** As a student, I can tell you that students don't feel safe in school – they try to get in trouble so they can stay at home. I like having officers in the classroom.

**CM:** *Do you have a place to go if you don't feel safe in school?*

**CM:** That's the disconnect. I'm a coach that had kids come to my house when they don't have an option for safety; disciplinary problems bubble up.

**CC:** As part of our **full-service school** model, we want to make sure students have full-relationships with adults.

**CM:** I think that the disciplinary action plan has a gap in the rule-making. We need to set the pretext that the end result is building a student's own self-discipline. *What are the strategies for that? How can we build that as a community?*

**CM:** I like the tier system – I think it needs to be clear of what patterns of persistent disruptive behavior need to be documented and how that happens.

**CM:** Move to logical consequences. Put in a definition for discipline, so people know it is not necessarily "punishment."

**CM:** The school parent-teacher handbook and student handbook was in conflict. School has their own handbooks that are sometimes different from central office rules and guidelines.

**CC:** This will absolutely coincide with individual school handbooks.

**CM:** Students need more outlets – physical outlets – so they can get rid of some pent up energy. All we have is lunch, no recess.

**CC:** Thank you very much.